

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος

In the beginning was the Word

The Bible in the Life of the Lutheran Communion



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Study Document on Lutheran Hermeneutics

“In the beginning was the Word”
(Jn 1:1): The Bible in the Life of
the Lutheran Communion

A Study Document on Lutheran Hermeneutics

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Contents

Preface	5
<i>Martin Junge</i>	
1. Introduction: The Lutheran churches' focus on the Bible and its interpretation.....	7
2. What does sola scriptura mean? Reading the Bible in light of the Lutheran Reformation.....	15
2.1. Luther's understanding and exegesis of the Bible.....	15
2.2 Sola scriptura and the tradition of the Church.....	16
2.3 The paradox of understanding: revelation and interpretation	17
3. Challenges of interpreting the Bible today	19
3.1. Contextual interpretation of the Bible amidst the plurality of cultures	19
3.2 Ongoing translation	20
3.3. Historical-critical reading of the Word of God.....	20
3.4. The Bible as a book communicating experiences with the living God	21
3.5. The Church as a "space of resonance" of the Bible	21
3.6. The tension between the common and the particular	21
3.7. Methodological considerations: various hermeneutical spirals.....	22
4. Opportunities for reading and understanding the Bible in the twenty-first century	25
4.1. Common ground.....	25
4.2. Plurality of meaning.....	26
4.3. Global dialogues.....	26
4.4. Lutheran branding.....	27
5. Recommendations	29
The task force	31

Preface

Martin Junge

Over the last four years intensive work has been undertaken to develop a study document on biblical hermeneutics. In light of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, the Lutheran communion sought to revisit its own theological roots and theological identity. At the heart of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the power of the Word of God, and the new interpretive emphasis on the centrality of Christ's saving work gave vitality to the Reformation.

Yet, as we celebrate this gift of the Holy Scriptures, we realize that there are tensions on how these should be read and their meaning appropriated in different contexts. The hermeneutics process brought together Lutheran and ecumenical theologians from all the regions of the communion to read selected biblical texts in light of the interpretive traditions of the Reformation and in response to local and global issues.

The results of this process were published in three volumes (the fourth is in process) and the lessons gleaned from this longer and more comprehensive process are synthesized in this statement for use by the LWF communion. The second section of the statement outlines the basic principles of Luther's biblical hermeneutics, highlights the dynamic character of his reading of the Bible with reference to the church traditions and draws attention to the reformers' emphasis on interpreting the Holy Scripture. The third section reflects on some of the challenges the Lutheran communion has to face when reading the Bible today, while the fourth section elaborates on the promises of shared readings of the Bible for the Lutheran communion. The concluding section proposes some recommendations to the LWF communion for ongoing processes of mutual learning and shared witness through reading and interpreting the Holy Scripture.

At its meeting in Wittenberg in June 2016, the LWF Council received the hermeneutics statement and made two recommendations. First, it

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commended the document to the member churches for study and action in order to ensure that the churches engage critically with their interpretive responsibilities at different levels. Second, the Council encouraged the member churches and the Communion Office to draw on the key elements of the document to inform the deliberations around the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The commemoration of the Reformation anniversary cannot lose sight of its biblical heritage.

I commend this study document to you and encourage the communion and all Christians as they celebrate and commemorate the Reformation anniversary to recommit themselves to the biblical resources for their faith and life.

1. Introduction: The Lutheran churches' focus on the Bible and its interpretation

- (1) Celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 challenges the Lutheran communion to reconsider its own theological roots and theological identity. For this purpose, it is essential to focus on the Bible. All churches and the secular world recognize that one of the Reformation's major contributions to Christianity and society was its specific emphasis on the Bible and its interpretation. The Reformation, starting symbolically with Luther's publication of his 95 theses in October 1517, drew renewed attention to the Bible as a source of life for all people and the Church's teaching. The distinct Lutheran understanding of the Church and Christian life cannot be appreciated today without considering the central position of the Bible and the principles of interpreting biblical texts. Moreover, during the Reformation the Bible became readily available. It was translated into local languages and printed editions were distributed at affordable prices. The goal was to enable people to read the Bible themselves, which implied the Reformation's commitment to an educational system that would equip young people to read and soundly to interpret biblical texts. This particular emphasis strengthened the confidence of many Christians to make up their own mind about God's will and Word for their individual and communal lives in their churches and societies.

- (2) The LWF uses the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 to highlight the paramount significance of the Bible for the Church and for the life of every Christian. The Bible presents the Word of God to our world as the word of life for all human beings, who are in manifold ways involved in guilt and threatened by powers that diminish life and lead to death. The Bible is the only Holy Scripture for the Church; it is the central source and norm for the churches' teachings and practices. For the Lutheran identity, it is central that faith is based on the testimony of the Holy Scripture. An example of this centrality of the Holy Scriptures for Christian practices can already be found in the first and second of Luther's 95 theses of 1517:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. This word cannot be

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy. (LW 31, 25)

- (3) Already here we can see how Luther criticized one of the Church’s customs by referring to the Bible in order to establish a more appropriate practice. Later on, this insistence to base all attempts to define the teachings and practices of the Church on Holy Scripture was summed up in the Latin phrase *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). This phrase is not directed against the Church’s traditions as such but, rather, against denying the Holy Scripture an independent and critical role in the Church’s life and decision-making processes. Thus, the *sola scriptura* led to the difficult task of establishing a spirit of ecclesial self-criticism in light of the Holy Scripture. This includes the ongoing obligation for Lutheran churches critically to review how they use and interpret the Bible: whether they follow only Holy Scripture and its internal principles of reading and understanding or subjugate Holy Scripture to external concepts and principles.
- (4) Therefore, the Bible’s crucial significance for the Church leads to questions of hermeneutics. For Luther, three hermeneutical principles were of central importance in order to maintain the character of the Holy Scripture as a free book, to preserve it from all attempts to subjugate it to various human interests and to ensure that it presents the free Word of God to all human beings: (1) the self-authentication of Holy Scripture (Holy Scripture is the sole guarantor of its own authority); (2) the self-interpretation of Holy Scripture (one passage of Holy Scripture can be understood in relation to other passages of the Bible and in light of the primary subject of the whole Bible, Jesus Christ); and (3) the clarity of the Holy Scripture (Holy Scripture is unambiguous with respect to its basic message of salvation, although some individual passages may be difficult to comprehend). With these hermeneutical principles, the phrase *sola scriptura* has become an identity marker of the Lutheran churches. Lutherans are convinced that real certainty of their salvation is based on Holy Scripture, which is definitively God’s promise and will for us. According to the Lutheran understanding, by providing this clarity about our salvation the Holy Scripture is also the basis of the unity of the Church.
- (5) Lutherans throughout the world hold the Bible in high esteem. This does not imply, however, that there are no disputes about the Bible and its interpretation in the Lutheran churches. Within the Lutheran communion today there continue to be controversies about the right interpretation

of the Holy Scripture and its consequences for our respective contexts. Such controversies in the twentieth century have included:

- The relevance of “Volk,” race or nation for the Church (anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany; apartheid in South Africa)
 - The ordination of women
 - Questions of sexuality.
- (6) In these controversies, the defenders of all positions claimed to have the Bible on their side. They have argued that they could justify their positions with reference to the Bible and that they were even obliged by the Bible to maintain this position. On some controversial issues, the Lutheran communion found a common position (e.g., against racism and ethnic exclusivism). They did so by spending time reading and discussing biblical texts together in order to reach a mutual understanding of the Bible. On other controversial issues, most churches within the Lutheran communion eventually decided in favor of one option, in spite of contradicting wordings in the Bible itself (e.g., in the issue of women’s ordination, 1 Cor 11:2–11 stands against 1 Cor 14:34–35 or 1 Tim 2:12–15), because the process of joint reading and discussion of the relevant biblical texts resulted in a unanimous agreement about the interpretation, also with respect to the disputed texts. Then there are those controversial issues that are still being discussed (e.g., homosexuality). For this reason, the decisions that were made on such issues have often been vehemently debated within the churches concerned. Therefore the process of jointly reading and discussing relevant biblical texts has not yet come to an end—neither in the churches nor in the LWF.
- (7) This observation draws our attention to the contextual character of any interpretation of the Bible. With respect to some controversial issues it is evident that the interpretation of the relevant biblical texts is strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors and understandings. It is a special challenge for the LWF as a global communion of churches to discern when it is essential to find a common understanding of texts that deal with controversial issues, and when it is possible to live with ongoing differences.
- (8) As a result, there are a number of open questions that have emerged within the global Lutheran communion. Since these are implicit in

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almost all of its debates and controversies, they will have to be dealt with explicitly:

- How do we read the Bible? How do we interpret it?
 - How does reading the Bible inspire and orient church debates and church decisions?
 - How do we reach a consensus about the meaning of biblical words?
 - Which aspects and methodological rules have to be considered for a responsible reading of the Bible?
 - How does historical-critical biblical research impact the theological interpretation of the Bible in the churches today?
 - What kind of direction and guidance can we expect from reading the Bible?
 - Do different (cultural, social, etc.) contexts possibly provoke or even demand different theological interpretations of the Bible?
 - How can we handle the difference between insights of faith that have to be accepted unanimously and adiaphora that allow for many different answers?
 - Is there a legitimate “critique of the Bible by the Bible” (like Luther’s critique of James with arguments of Paul), and if so, how can we handle this?
- (9) In order to deal with these questions, the LWF initiated a study process on Lutheran hermeneutics within the global Lutheran communion, 2011—2016. Using a new interdisciplinary methodological format, this truly global and intercultural study process brought together exegetes, historians of religion, Reformation experts and systematic theologians and theologians from all LWF regions. Four conferences were held, each one of which focused on one biblical book in particular: Nairobi, Kenya (2011, John); Eisenach, Germany (2013, Psalms); Chicago, USA (2014, Matthew); Aarhus, Denmark (2015, Paul’s letters). The results of these conferences have been or will soon be published.

(10) The first conference focused on the Gospel of John. The reason for beginning with John was to concentrate on more methodological aspects of biblical interpretation and to clarify the general understanding of theological hermeneutics. The discussion at this first conference helped to unfold the questions and perspectives that are involved in biblical interpretation. It became clear that various situations and settings of biblical reading and interpretation have to be distinguished: these include individual Bible reading; the use of biblical texts in worship; the interpretation of a biblical text in a sermon or Bible study; the use of biblical texts in church debates and decision making; academic exegesis; and the use of the Bible with regard to doctrinal or moral questions, etc. All these situations present their own, specific hermeneutical challenge. It also became clear that, given the variety of contemporary practices of reading and interpreting the Bible in globally diverse contexts, it is impossible to formulate a list of joint rules for reading and interpreting biblical texts. The conference created a strong sense of the diversity of contextual readings and interpretations, which was further strengthened by the diverse opinions on the role of the traditional Lutheran confessions such as the *Book of Concord* (or, in particular, the Augsburg Confession). Some considered the confessions to be strict doctrinal guidelines for biblical interpretation, while others saw that position as an inappropriate subjugation of the Holy Scripture to doctrines that were formulated in a specific time and context. They considered such an emphasis on the confessions as a change of the *Book of Concord's* own distinction between primary authority (Holy Scripture) and secondary authority (confessions), which implies a self-qualification of the confessions with reference to the Holy Scripture. Beside this basic and fundamental problem, the conference articulated some more open questions that are relevant for all Lutheran communities:

- How can our congregations and churches not only interpret Scripture faithfully but also become living interpretations of the gospel for others?
- How can we act responsively in the process of interpreting and communicating passages in the Bible that we perceive not only as unclear and difficult but as offensive and oppressive?
- What difference do our respective contexts make in reading Scripture? In what ways does Scripture clarify and challenge our context?

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

- How can those who lead others in reading Scripture help empower them to become and remain faithful and mature readers and not impose their own reading?
- What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of biblical interpretation alongside the text, the interpreter and the context?
- What is the significance of local traditions? Do local traditions (sacred and secular) play a role in or influence our theologizing and interpretation of biblical texts? If so, in what ways?
- How do we avoid anti-Jewish readings as we interpret Scripture in preaching and catechesis?
- How can Lutheran hermeneutics learn from and contribute to the richness of interpretations in other Christian traditions?

(11) The second conference was held in Eisenach, Germany, within walking distance of the Wartburg castle, where Luther translated the New Testament. It focused on the Psalms and helped clarify some of the questions raised at the first conference. Helpful for this were the contributions of a few presenters from other denominational traditions. In their common reading and interpretation of the Psalms and by reflecting on the hermeneutics of the Psalms, the participants learned to recognize both the plurality of contexts and the commonality of human experience. Especially in the psalms of lament, the paradoxes of life are recognized as trans-contextual because all humans are confronted with them, despite all differences of context. Also in other psalms the human condition that all beings share amidst their diverse contexts can be identified trans-contextually. Thus, in a joint reading of the Psalms the human condition can be grasped more deeply. Lutherans from all contexts also share in Martin Luther’s experience of the Psalms deepening and extending the understanding of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we see the human condition in the presence of God. Nevertheless, there are still ways of reading and interpreting psalms that are specific to particular contexts, responding to political, economic, cultural and religious situations and challenges. In order to connect the common understandings and descriptions of the human condition to the various contextual responses to biblical texts requires ongoing interpretation. A further important learning from the second conference was that the reception of the Psalms in the New Testament significantly contributes to the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

- (12) The third conference, held in Chicago, USA, focused on the Gospel of Matthew. With its emphasis on the Law, this New Testament book challenged participants once again to deal with the close relationship between the New and the Old Testaments and encouraged reflection on the role, understanding and interpretation of the Law in the Bible and in the Lutheran churches and theology. One of the topics explored at the conference was the meaning of Luther's preference for the "literal" rather than the "spiritual" interpretation, especially for a text such as the Sermon on the Mount. By not spiritualizing the provocative imperatives of this text, Luther did not choose the obvious interpretation. Instead, the literal sense of the "antitheses" forced him to find new conceptual distinctions with consequences for the concept of a true and perfect Christian life. Again, it became clear that it is possible to identify basic human situations that the biblical texts address trans-contextually. Thus, the joint cross-cultural reading and interpretation of biblical texts leads participants into a deeper encounter with their respective lives and realities.
- (13) The fourth conference took place in Aarhus, Denmark, and focused on the letters of Paul. Special attention was given to the role, understanding and interpretation of the gospel in the Bible and in the Lutheran churches and theology. Reading Paul in light of his Jewish background, some scholars go as far as to argue for the positive role of the Law in Paul's writing and from there to critique the Lutheran doctrine of justification. Lutheran hermeneutics has critically to deal with this position in order not to give up an identity marker of the Lutheran tradition and teaching that highlights the soteriological implication of belief. In detailed presentations it became clear that the reflection on the relationship between Law and gospel in Paul and in Lutheran doctrine can be fruitfully developed by further theological clarifications on the role of tradition and scriptural hermeneutics in Pauline and Lutheran ecclesial teaching. The Aarhus conference not only sharpened insights on the pluriform contextuality of all interpretations, but also developed the sense that a shared perception of diverse contextualities opens up new, fresh and stimulating ways of biblical readings and interpretations.
- (14) The gleanings from this process included in this statement are intended for use by the LWF communion. Chapter 2 recollects the basic principles of Luther's biblical hermeneutics, highlights the dynamic character of his Bible reading with reference to church traditions and draws attention to the reformers' emphasis on interpreting the Holy

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

Scripture. Chapter 3 reflects on some of the challenges the Lutheran communion has to face when reading the Bible today. Chapter 4 elaborates on the promising opportunities a shared reading of the Bible provides for the Lutheran communion. In conclusion, chapter 5 formulates some recommendations to the LWF communion for ongoing processes of mutual learning and shared witness through reading and interpreting the Holy Scripture.

2. What does sola scriptura mean? Reading the Bible in light of the Lutheran Reformation

2.1. Luther's understanding and exegesis of the Bible

- (15) Luther basically trusted that (1) the Bible reveals its real meaning by itself; (2) is reliable because by revealing God's will and work it authorizes itself; and (3) that what it reveals is sufficient for our knowledge of God and God's work of salvation and our certainty of being saved.
- (16) Therefore, from his early days, Luther objected to the medieval concept of the "fourfold meaning of the Scripture" which, besides the "literal meaning," implied three different forms of "allegorical meaning": each word of the Bible, whatever it is, has an implicit ethical, ecclesial and eschatological meaning that can be made explicit by interpretation. Yet, Luther insisted that this "allegorical" interpretation is arbitrary and reads something into the text instead of expecting the text to speak by itself. Luther, thus, prioritized the "literal meaning."
- (17) For Luther, however, "literal meaning" does not refer to the meaning the text had in its original historical context. Rather, the "literal meaning" derives from the text's function to guide people to faith in Christ and evoke faith in Christ: "*was Christum treibet*" ("what bears Christ"). This is also true for the Old Testament: Luther reads the Old Testament—in its "literal meaning"—as a testimony of Christ or, more precisely, as a testimony to the Triune God who has become human in Christ. So Luther affirms the unity of the Old and New Testaments, which implies that the Old Testament is being read in the light of the New.
- (18) Luther's Bible is unique, different from any other Bible: it includes all books of the Hebrew Bible, but in a different order. It does not include the books which are only part of the Greek (and Latin) version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (and Vulgate). Luther called them "Apocrypha" and published them as an appendix to the Old Testament. In the New Testament, he changed the order by moving the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter of James—both of which he found theologically problematic—to the end of the Bible, together with the Apocalypse.

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

- (19) This shows that evidently Luther was willing to criticize Scripture in the name of Scripture or, more precisely, to criticize parts of the Scripture in light of other parts which he identified as displaying the core message of the Scripture. For instance, he confronted the word of James that “faith without works is dead” with Paul’s conviction that we are justified by faith alone without works.
- (20) Luther developed some crucial hermeneutical rules for dealing with (sometimes controversial, sometimes unclear) biblical texts:
- We should not expect to find the whole picture in every biblical word. For example, Luther emphasizes that whereas Paul and John focus on the crucial truth of grace and faith, Matthew underlines the relevance of works, without neglecting the basic idea of justification by faith alone.
 - The distinction between Law and gospel has to be used as a basic hermeneutical principle. It is important to see that this distinction is not equivalent to the distinction between the Old and New Testaments. Luther did not claim that the Old Testament was the Law and the New Testament the gospel. There is gospel in the Old and Law in the New Testament. Luther even said that the same text can function as Law or as gospel, depending on whether the reader receives it as demanding or as promising. Yet, the core message of the Bible is the gospel of God’s saving grace. How a legal text is to be dealt with can therefore only be decided in relation to the gospel.
 - The doctrine of the two realms is also of hermeneutical relevance. Luther insists that the Bible does not instruct us on how to organize our outward life. It does not guide how we govern a state, raise children, build a house, grow corn, etc. Thus, Luther claims that the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, does not address state authorities: the authorities are not meant to turn the other cheek. Because it is their duty to care for outward peace and justice, they are entitled, and sometimes even obliged, to use violence for that purpose.

2.2 *Sola scriptura* and the tradition of the Church

- (21) The principle of *sola scriptura* implied a qualification of the authority of church doctrine. More precisely, it changed the authorization of

church doctrine. A doctrine is no longer true because it is authorized by church authorities but, rather, it is true because (and if and insofar as) it is an adequate expression of the Holy Scripture. Thus, the Holy Scripture is the criterion of church doctrine. Reading the Scripture can result in objecting to a doctrine.

- (22) No church authority—neither pope nor council—can claim the exclusive right to interpret Scripture. Popes as well as councils can err and actually have erred. This does not mean that church traditions and church doctrines are irrelevant; it only means that their authority is limited by Scripture.
- (23) Luther, and above all Melancthon, highly appreciated the doctrinal tradition of the church. In his famous 1545 retrospective about his way to the Reformation, Luther mentioned that he was pleased to find his interpretation of the biblical term “God’s justice” also in St Augustine’s work, *On the Spirit and the Letter*. So he did not disparage the voice of church tradition but, rather, welcomed it when it supported his interpretation of Scripture. However, he felt compelled to resist tradition if it contradicted what he understood to be the clear meaning of Scripture, for example when at the Holy Supper the wine was only given to the priests. Thus, he attributed to church tradition a second order authority.
- (24) The Lutheran Reformation established a doctrinal tradition: the Lutheran confessions. These confessions reflected their own position in relation to Holy Scripture: they are the secondary authority, whereas Scripture is the primary authority. They describe a hermeneutical circle between Scripture and confessional tradition: the confessions interpret Scripture and, at the same time, have to be reviewed and revised in light of Scripture. Therefore, the confessions on the one hand help to read Scripture while, on the other, they have to be assessed in light of Scripture. This hermeneutical circle remains a permanent challenge for the Lutheran reading of the Bible.

2.3 The paradox of understanding: revelation and interpretation

- (25) The reformers shared the conviction that the Bible reveals its truth by itself. The fact that we cannot understand the true meaning of the Bible by our own means and efforts, but have to receive it from

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

outside by grace alone, is a hermeneutical consequence of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

- (26) Yet, the Reformers insisted that it is important to train people to understand the Bible. Lutheran theologians have always emphasized the challenge of reading and interpreting the Bible. Not incidentally, research on biblical exegesis has been cultivated and elaborated in the Protestant churches.
- (27) The tension between revelation and interpretation requires a specific ethos of reading. Luther spoke of prayer, meditation and personal struggle as the three rules guiding a correct and authentic reading of the Scripture.
- (28) The plurality and multiformity of biblical voices render the task of understanding the Bible more difficult. Because of different perspectives in the Bible, some insist that it is necessary that a church authority decide on the right or wrong interpretation (this was the way in which Erasmus of Rotterdam for example argued against Luther). Luther, on the contrary, argued that in its very core, the gospel of justification by faith alone, the Bible is clear and unanimous and communicates the certainty of the truth of this gospel: “The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic” (*LW* 33, 24). The interpretation of the manifold texts of the Bible, then, must derive from and be based on this core insight. According to Luther, the real meaning of the Bible in any of its parts is “what bears Christ” (cf. *LW* 35, 396).
- (29) This hermeneutical rule, to display “what bears Christ,” implies the task of interpretation. The idea of “verbal inspiration” (every wording of the Bible is inspired and even directly dictated by God) is therefore not an adequate expression of Lutheran hermeneutics, although time and again it has been defended by Lutheran theologians.

3. Challenges of interpreting the Bible today

- (30) There is no reading of the Bible without interpretation. Even if we do not dare to go as far as Luther did and reshape the canon of the biblical books, we are still engaging in a hermeneutical process whenever we read. Thus, the question of interpretation is not “yes or no” but, rather, “What kind of interpretation is a valid Lutheran interpretation today?” This question gives rise to a number of concerns, some of which are presented here for further reflection.

3.1. Contextual interpretation of the Bible amidst the plurality of cultures

- (31) When we read a biblical pericope, we do it with a threefold lens: first, we read as twenty-first-century Christians (therefore, with a background knowledge of the Old and New Testaments). Second, we read as Lutherans (therefore, with a background knowledge of Luther’s and Lutheran writings). Third, we read as people of a particular gender, age, ethnicity, culture and education, living in a particular corner of the world (therefore, fully aware of war and terrorism, political unrest, the unequal distribution of wealth and power and ecological and other crises). Since all of these and other individual preoccupations are with us as we read, we see a text in a way that differs from the way in which others see it. Thus, interpreting the Bible amidst a plurality of cultures is an enriching experience, since it enables us to appreciate the value and biases of our own reading and that of others. God’s Word can confront and move us, wherever we are located.
- (32) In the process of reading the Bible, the first step is the translation into the vernacular. This is a step we probably do not undertake ourselves and often do not even consider, because normally we simply read the Bible in our mother tongue. Readers might ask themselves, What does this mean? Is the text to be taken literally or figuratively? What might the historical background of this text be and how does it translate to our setting today? They might pose such questions as, Is it Law or gospel to us? Does it tell us anything with regard to the situation we find ourselves in? Can we derive any message from this text for decisions, i.e., concerning sexuality? In the following sections we will reflect on the challenges that interpretation poses.

3.2 Ongoing translation

- (33) Luther’s concern with how to make a Hebrew prophet speak German (and still remain a Hebrew prophet) is one that faces every translator. At a different level, a more serious issue is how to translate terms that show different perceptions of reality. Particularly with regard to topics relating to stages of life, the “house,” family and sexual relationships and the body, many questions remain unanswered. With regard to these and other themes, every faithful translator must ponder how much to import from a foreign (and ancient) worldview into their own culture. The gospel may come to us in a garment other than the one it took in John’s or Paul’s times, in Luther’s times, or even in our own earlier experiences.

3.3. Historical-critical reading of the Word of God

- (34) Understanding the Word of God historically, as a product of human culture, presents another obstacle. By historical-critical method we refer to a set of tools developed in the eighteenth century in biblical exegesis in order to bring to light as much historical information (such as probable date, place of origin, authorship and literary sources and resources used) on a text as possible. Although the various perspectives in the Bible were not ignored in pre-modern times, the diversity of voices in the Bible has been focused on more intensively by means of historical research. Yet, in recent decades, scholars have also focused on readings that emphasize a text’s message as a literary work, independent of its origin.
- (35) While historical-critical research increased the historical distance between the biblical text and its interpreters, it also deepened the perception of God’s Word as a dynamic force that speaks to each new generation in terms understandable to that generation. In many books one recognizes inner-biblical dialogues, in which later authors picked up and reshaped earlier revelations (this is particularly evident in, though not unique to, the prophetic corpus, see for instance Hos 1:2–2:15, followed by Hos 2:16–3:5). They did not consider such actions to be a betrayal of an earlier Word by God, but a way faithfully to extend its meaning.

3.4. The Bible as a book communicating experiences with the living God

- (36) How we understand the Bible as “the Word of God” is one of the most serious tasks we face. Apart from making visible the historical distance between modern and ancient times, such a critical approach also changed the perception of the Bible as God’s Word. How can the biblical Scriptures still be acknowledged as testimonies of God’s revelation once they have been received as products of human culture? Do we see God still addressing us via a biblical text and its interpretation, even if the biblical words are not exact quotations? Answers to these questions vary widely among Christians, from those who reject such an approach and see God’s words as dictated to God’s scribes, to those who see the Bible as a collection of testimonies of faith that aims at provoking, forming and strengthening faith, and a number of intermediary positions. These differences are profound and should not be dismissed. Rather, we should celebrate that we can listen to God’s voice through our diverse experiences and ways of understanding one another and the world.

3.5. The Church as a “space of resonance” of the Bible

- (37) Our church contexts present us with another challenge. Since the Lutheran confessions recognize both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as the Christian Bible, they establish and confirm each testament as a hermeneutical clue to reading the other testament within the church. Not only that: the church is also our communion of interpretation and learning. In particular, the global Lutheran communion is our “space of resonance.” The principle of *sola scriptura*, for instance, leads us to consider other writings (e.g., the writings of the fathers) of lesser value. And we also read by focusing on grace alone, Law and gospel, the priesthood of all believers and the cross as central theological insights that determine how we see Jesus and our own ministries (individual and as communities).

3.6. The tension between the common and the particular

- (38) To be mindful of the tension between the common and the particular is one of the most demanding tasks that we face. In our time and age, the church forms a global communion, which we are proud to belong to. At the same time, post-modernism has stressed particu-

“In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1)

larity over uniformity. Thus, today we allow space for several groups within the church and society to find their options and experiences mirrored in the Bible and the community of faith. Many of these groups have been able to put into writing their hermeneutics, such as feminist theologies with several intersections of race, class and culture, liberation theologies, queer theologies, Dalit theologies and others. We are thus required to take into consideration the relevance and the meaning of a plurality of contextual resonances of the Bible. Yet, this poses other challenge to us. The principle of contextuality implies that what in one context is helpful might be disconcerting or destabilizing in another context (a practice suffered by non-hegemonic groups as long as their particular reading was ignored).

3.7. Methodological considerations: various hermeneutical spirals

- (39) If we look at how the Bible came into being, we realize that the Hebrew Scriptures enabled early Christians to understand the person and work of Jesus as the Christ. In particular, Jesus developed an ethos of love which is radically inclusive, qualifying and overcomes cultural and religious limitations of every kind (see also Gal 3:28).
- (40) The Hebrew Scriptures (what the New Testament calls “the Law and the prophets,” see e.g., Mt 5:17, Lk 24:44) enabled early Christians to understand that Jesus of Nazareth was not the founder of a new religion, but the long-expected Messiah for Israel and the world. The first gospels wanted to make that clear. Peter, James and other apostles, such as Paul, had different understandings of what it meant to remain faithful to Jesus the Christ, despite pressures both from other Christian groups and the political and religious authorities of their cities. Thus, the New Testament grew as a corpus that interpreted different experiences with Jesus and with his disciples against the horizon of a “people of God,” as read in light of the Old Testament, but with their new concerns and challenges in mind. For instance, the New Testament includes notions of law and righteousness as diverse as those of Matthew, Paul and James. These authors took their insights from their own scriptural understanding, choosing different texts to quote and even using them to express a distinct nuance.
- (41) When biblical authors use a scriptural reference for a new argument or situation, such as the evangelists and Paul do, they go back to the

Scripture they are quoting. By doing so they do not just repeat the text but, rather, reread it in light of their respective situations. Biblical interpretation, therefore, may be depicted as a hermeneutical spiral (rather than a straight journey or a closed circle), because it is an ongoing process: “coming back” to a biblical text means listening to it bearing in mind the questions of our time and contexts with the expectation of finding answers in light of it. Reading the Bible in this way changes our situation because it affects our way of understanding it. Neither the Bible nor our situation is static; interpretation produces a dynamic interplay between text and context. This applies to Paul’s use of the Bible as to Luther’s readings of Paul. Interpretation, then, involves hearing the distinctiveness of the biblical voices and allowing them to speak to us today, even if certain tensions between these voices remain when we examine how each of them bears witness to God. We may not do otherwise.

4. Opportunities for reading and understanding the Bible in the twenty-first century

- (42) Reading and understanding the Bible is one of the most promising opportunities for the Lutheran churches. It enables Lutherans around the globe to remember, proclaim and practice the gospel message in ecclesial and societal life by being in contact with its initial setting in the context of the Old and New Testament writings (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–5).
- (43) Reading and understanding the Bible in twenty-first-century Lutheran churches provides (1) common ground for expressing Christian belief, hope and love; and a shared platform for (2) searching for the breadth and depth of textual meanings; (3) engaging in global dialogues about the identity of Lutheran faith and ethics; and (4) developing the brand mark of the Lutheran churches in a worldwide quest to balance the power of politics, religions and cultures.

4.1. Common ground

- (44) Christians of all generations find common ground whenever they read the Bible. Throughout 2000 years of church history, biblical texts have been constantly studied and cited, translated and rewritten, debated and commented on and reproduced, and have provided a focus for meditation. Moreover, the Bible is the most famous and widely read piece of world literature, and its influence is felt throughout the globe.
- (45) The anniversary of the Reformation reminds Lutherans of the powerful way in which Bible studies renew the faith of the church and the hope in the salvific message of the resurrection of Christ. Opportunities for studying the Bible have a tremendous potential for impacting life and instilling the Christian principles of spirit and love as attested to in the Scriptures (e.g., 1 Cor 12-14; Jn 14-16).
- (46) Over time and space, Lutherans throughout the world can connect with one another in their common efforts to disclose the meaning of biblical texts through their witness and explicating the gospel message (e.g., Mk 1:14f.; Rom 1:16f.) in their respective contexts.

4.2. Plurality of meaning

- (47) The Bible is an open book, which should be accessible to all readers, in all languages and at all times. Biblical texts were written in different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—and afterwards they were translated into many other languages. Ongoing translation projects are an essential part of the history of the Bible’s reception. The richness of this reception can be found in literature, music and art. It is apparent in the fruitful diversity of reading interests—be they intellectual, liturgical or spiritual—which result from the plurality of topics, forms and genres that is already inherent in the canon of biblical writings. These include prophecy and poetry, historical narratives and moral exhortations, apocalyptic speeches and sapiential teachings which define the wide range of literary expressions used by biblical authors in Old and New Testament times. The manifold linguistic and textual worlds of literary expression in biblical writings correspond to their multifaceted history of origin and reception history: behind biblical texts lie a wide variety of religious experiences, historically bound to the diverse geographical and cultural contexts of the Near East and the Mediterranean. That, in turn, leads to a biblical canon in which there is a plurality of meanings that readers in various cultural contexts have identified, as we can see in the history of the reception of the Bible.
- (48) The anniversary of the Reformation reminds Lutherans of the powerful gift of multifaceted and pluralistic, divisive and unifying Bible studies, where ministers and laypeople, teachers and students, old and young, East and West, North and South, can help to instruct one another about the life-giving truth of the gospel message.
- (49) Because of different ages and gender, social status and geographical location, Lutherans can share the recognition that a diverse reading inspires an even more authentic perception of different biblical traditions: the plurality of meaning in different contexts enriches the initial meaning of biblical texts. This is the genuine task of Bible studies.

4.3. Global dialogues

- (50) The shared task of biblical interpretation unifies Lutherans around the globe. Whenever people study the Bible, the shared perception of the plurality of meaning facilitates global dialogues on the textual

corner stones of Christian faith and ethics (e.g., Mt 5–7). Throughout the centuries, all readers have been invited to participate in the never-ending process of biblical interpretation. In the twenty-first century, many global political and ethical challenges increasingly call for global discourses—be it in the field of religious competition, war and terrorism, economy, ecology, education, gender, sexuality or health. Biblical texts, which are themselves written in an ongoing negotiation between regional and universal interests (e.g., Acts 1:8) and claims, exemplify how today's global problems can be envisioned in light of biblical studies: more than ever biblical books herein prove their continuous relevance.

- (51) The anniversary of the Reformation reminds Lutherans around the globe of the powerful gift of ecclesial communion. In a global discourse about Bible readings, which can easily end up in arbitrariness and randomness, Lutherans can raise their voice in favor of studying the Bible in light of philology, history and hermeneutics. Thus, actual political challenges and needs in church and society can be approached by solid and reliable methods of textual interpretation.
- (52) After 500 years of carefully reading and studying the Bible, Lutherans have—in joy and pain—learned to see how biblical interpretation in the Lutheran tradition only succeeds as a shared endeavor that always reveals Christ's gospel message and orients itself toward human beings.

4.4. Lutheran branding

- (53) Reading and understanding the Bible in the twenty-first century further develops Lutheran branding. In a world subject to global threats and possibilities, hostility and cooperation, intimidation and networking, the Bible is a pillar of strength. Biblical texts deal with all stages of human life by offering concrete but timeless paradigms of grief, sorrow, pain, praise, repentance and hope. All biblical writings focus on the crucial human quest, What is a human being in its relation to others and in dependence on God (Ps 8)?
- (54) The anniversary of the Reformation reminds Lutherans of the powerful gift of the Bible as a book of the Church: Luther was always confident that the Bible provides knowledgeable and existential, intellectual and spiritual, provocative and peaceful guidance in our

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present lifetime, at home and in the world. Today, Lutherans will witness anew to the power and magnitude of the gospel message as shown in the biblical texts.

- (55) In and beyond 2017, Lutherans are more than ever committed to let their journey through life and the world be joyfully accompanied by others who share the life-giving desire of reading and understanding the Bible.

5. Recommendations

(56) As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation we remember how the risen Christ “opened the Scriptures” and commissioned his followers to proclaim his message “to all nations” (Lk 24:46–47). We are a global communion in which the Scriptures have a vital place. Therefore we:

- a. **Reaffirm the Lutheran emphasis that the heart of the Bible is its salvific message.** God’s Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Church through the gospel, which the Bible proclaims. The gospel is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). The whole Bible is to be interpreted in light of the message that brings life.
- b. **Commit ourselves to learning from one another globally about the ways in which the Bible can best be heard in our diverse contexts.** The books of the Bible were written at different times and in different places, and they offer a rich variety of perspectives. As the Bible is read in different contexts throughout the world, it engenders fresh perspectives. We benefit and are constructively challenged by hearing insights that emerge from contexts different from our own. We commit ourselves to creating opportunities for people from our member churches to meet and study the Scriptures, and to share those insights with the wider communion. We therefore also commit ourselves to the ongoing task to translate the Scripture from the original languages to the respective native languages in order to make it accessible to people of our time.
- c. **Commit ourselves to ongoing dialogue about points of biblical interpretation on which members of the LWF disagree.** We recognize that interpretation is an ongoing process. The Church is a community in which different interpretations can be discussed, both locally and globally. We commit ourselves to continued dialogue about our understanding of Scripture within the context of Christian fellowship.

- d. Commit ourselves to supporting theological education that prepares pastors, teachers and leaders effectively to interpret Scripture.** The Bible has a central place in the Church’s preaching and teaching. The Lutheran tradition values educating leaders who use their knowledge of biblical languages and are aware of the different forms of interpretation that build up the community of faith. We commit ourselves to creating educational opportunities (including the development of a global network of Lutheran theologians) that prepare leaders globally to engage those they serve in the study of Scripture.
- e. Commit ourselves to encouraging the Church to recognize the Bible as a resource for social commitment.** We seek to ensure that our spiritual and academic engagement with the Bible also inspires the church’s social commitment towards “a just, peaceful and reconciled world” as stated in the LWF vision statement.

The task force

During its five year-cycle, the LWF hermeneutics process involved more than sixty Lutheran theologians from the seven regions of the LWF. A core group of participants accompanied the entire process, some of whom constituted the hermeneutics task force which prepared this statement.

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